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DE RUEHPS #0130/01 0721751

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FM USOFFICE PRISTINA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8122

INFO RUEHZN/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 1025

RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK PRIORITY

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1456

RHFMIS/AFSOUTH NAPLES IT PRIORITY

RHMFIS/CDR TF FALCON PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RUEPGEA/CDR650THMIGP SHAPE BE PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEAWJA/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC PRIORITY

RUZEJAA/USNIC PRISTINA SR PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRISTINA 000130

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DEPT FOR DRL, INL, EUR/SCE
NSC FOR BRAUN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/07/2018

TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL KV UNMIK

SUBJECT: KOSOVO: STRPCE STABLE FOR NOW, BUT TENSION MAY BE
GROWING

Classified By: Chief of Mission Tina S. Kaidanow for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Serb KPS in Strpce remain on the job primarily out of fear that Albanian police would take over if they leave the force. Strpce's civil servants are also staying at work for similar reasons. Despite this, tension is still evident, along with the number of demonstrators at the daily protest downtown at 1244. Strpce CEO Radica Grbic's message to the Kosovo government and the international community is "leave us alone" and avoid pressuring the Serbs into doing anything they cannot do. Despite this, she echoed hopes held by many of Kosovo's Serbs that UNMIK would stay on as a "bridge" between Serbs and Albanians, but like Kosovo Serbs elsewhere, had no alternative to offer when asked what her community would do in UNMIK's absence. Cooperation with the new ICO/EULEX missions is still ruled out by local Serb leaders, but neither she nor Strpce Mayor Stanko Jakovljevic is happy with the behavior of Government of Serbia officials; Jakovljevic has warned KFOR of "infiltrators" from Serbia present in his municipality. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) For the moment, Kosovo Serb members of the Kosovo Police Force (KPS) remain on the job in Serb-majority Strpce municipality, even as their Serb brethren in central Kosovo have left the force. According to UNMIK CivPol officer Teresa Pyle (protect), who has monitored the Strpce KPS force for almost two years, the key motivation for staying on the job is not a sense of allegiance to UNMIK or disagreement with Belgrade. According to both Pyle and confirmed by Strpce CEO Radica Grbic in a separate meeting March 6, there is widespread fear in the community that an Albanian KPS unit from nearby Ferizaj/Urosevac, which was involved in a controversial police raid in Strpce in April 2007, would enter the enclave to police it should the local officers depart. The municipality is behind this decision, which to Pyle is an indication of Belgrade's support.

¶3. (C) Pyle also advocates a more hands-off policy by UNMIK CIVPOL and said she recommended they not exert too much pressure and allow Serb KPS to make their own decision to stay on the job. Grbic said that she and Strpce Mayor Stanko Jakovljevic (a member of Serbian President Tadic's DS party)

have also been working with the local police commander to keep the KPS on the job. Pyle and Grbic both said that the withdrawal of Serb KPS from a larger, geographically-contiguous enclave such as Strpce would create a "big hole" in KPS coverage, unlike the smaller enclaves in central Kosovo from which Serb officers have withdrawn in recent days. Such a gap would necessitate swift compensatory action from KPS headquarters.

¶4. (C) Strpce Serbs continue to resist independence in various ways, all of them peaceful to date. Grbic said that Serb employees in the municipal government have continued to come to work, but in order to maintain a "boycott" of Kosovo institutions, they are not doing much of anything. As with the police, Grbic told us that the Serb presence in the municipal building has been maintained in order to prevent a "takeover" by Strpce's minority Albanian community. Daily protests continue to take place in the center of town at 12:44 p.m. Pyle told us that beginning the week of March 3, the protests have grown larger and more organized each day, although no incidents have occurred. Some middle-aged men have joined the protests in recent days, bolstering the normally-young crowd.

¶5. (C) Grbic insisted, however, that despite the current apparent calm, tension runs deep among local Serbs. She told us that "if we lose control over the KPS, everyone will leave Strpce," although she praised US KFOR and reiterated her confidence in KFOR's ability to protect Serbs. As many Serbs have since February 17, Grbic insisted that cooperation was possible with international donors and UNMIK, and like many Kosovo Serbs elsewhere had no alternative solution for when what might happen if/when UNMIK left the scene. In her

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words, "we don't get anything from Pristina and they don't need anything from us, so why can't they leave us alone?" Cooperation with ICO/EULEX was not an option. At the same time Grbic pleaded with us not to "abandon" Strpce, she did not appear ready to offer any constructive solutions. She also made several strongly-worded appeals to the "international community" not to place any pressure on the Strpce Serbs to do anything.

¶6. (C) Unlike past meetings, Grbic was open to a limited discussion of the Serbian Government's influence and activity in the area. According to Grbic, Jakovljevic is under pressure from hardline forces in Belgrade. She described the visit to Strpce of Serbian Minister for Kosovo Slobodan Samardzic on January 18 as "scary," and complained about his verbal lashing of Jakovljevic at a meeting of CCK and DSS officials.

¶7. (C) While figures like Grbic, Mayor Jakovljevic, and the local KPS seem to be acting reasonably for now, reports from USKFOR indicate that other actors in Strpce may have different intentions. At a private meeting held at Camp Bondsteel on February 23, Jakovljevic reported to USKFOR POLAD that there were 10-15 "infiltrators" in Strpce, who had come from Serbia and who could cause trouble. He is worried that these actors might manufacture an incident, even going so far as to attack the municipal building or local branches of Serbian banks (through which funds come from Belgrade) in an attempt to cause an exodus of Serbs. In his opinion, whether they stay loyal to the KPS or not, the local KPS would not be capable of protecting these sites if they came under attack. On March 6, USKFOR POLAD told us that Jakovljevic had come to Camp Bondsteel again and revealed several names of these infiltrators, including a retired Serbian MUP colonel who was last in Strpce in 1999. Jakovljevic also said that since February 17 he has sought guidance from senior figures in the DS party structure.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Things in Strpce are calm for the moment, but the

factors contributing to that calm are fluid and can change, particularly if Belgrade's attitude hardens even further. Echoing the refrain we have heard from many other Serbs in the weeks since independence, Radica Grbic maintains that UNMIK can be the only "legitimate" bridge between Kosovo Serbs and the Kosovo Government going forward, which is not a viable long-term plan of action. We will continue our contacts and urge ICO to attempt to develop its own contacts in Strpce and elsewhere in the enclaves, to the extent that anyone is willing or able to talk freely with them. END

COMMENT.
KAIDANOW